

TRAVEL

36 Hours in Nashville: The Food Scene

By THE NEW YORK TIMES AUG. 24, 2015

“36 Hours,” a television program inspired by The Times’s 36 Hours column, airs Mondays at 8 p.m. Eastern on Travel Channel. The second episode, “Rockin’ Nashville,” dovetails with our column from last September.

Kim Severson, who writes about food for The Times, answers questions about the Nashville culinary scene.

Q. How does Nashville stand up as a culinary Southern hot spot when you compare it to places like Charleston and New Orleans?

A. It’s important to think about the South as the Italy of America when it comes to food. That is, there is no place more regionally specific. The Creole canon of New Orleans is very different from the Cajun influence that comes when you head into the middle of Louisiana. In far eastern North Carolina, the barbecue will come from a whole hog and the sauce will have only vinegar and black pepper without a bit of tomato. In Georgia, there will be ribs and shoulder and even the brisket that is more prominent in Texas, all with a tomato-based sauce. So when we talk about the big culinary hitters when it comes to the great Southern food cities, it’s hard to compare. But I will say that any higher-end Southern chef definitely has an eye toward opening a restaurant in Nashville these days because it is so dynamic and both the audience and good-quality meat and produce are there in abundance. The number of people from the high-tech sector, the country music industry and,

increasingly, the Los Angeles music and film scene demand sophisticated food, but they also want it to be authentic. So you can get a great mix of smart takes on Southern standards along with dishes that push the envelope, with wine lists and cocktails to match.

With all the experimentation going on in Nashville restaurants these days, do you think some of the simple classic dishes are getting a) lost in the shuffle or b) getting a new lease on life, so to speak?

Both thoughts are true. With experimentation comes ridiculousness, but also brilliance. Nashville is known for something called hot chicken, which is soaked in buttermilk and hot sauce, fried in a cast iron pan, brushed with cayenne oil and served on white bread and supermarket pickle slices, often in very bare-bones settings. I had a hot chicken homage at the gastro-temple called Cat Bird Seat made with fried chicken skin, Korean chile flakes and dill powder. It was great, but it made me want the real thing. Many chefs are simply doing good food based on great Southern ingredients, and there are good, old-fashioned meat-and-threes like Arnold's to be found in Nashville, as well as new but true interpretations of Southern food at places like Sean Brock's restaurant Husk.

What makes a good biscuit? What are the regional differences?

As we discussed, Southern food is regional and biscuits are really regional. Everyone's family made biscuits back in the day, so if you ask a Southerner for a definition of a good biscuit, you'll hear about how his or her mama made them. There are beaten biscuits and cream biscuits and biscuits made with lard or whose dough is so loose that they have to be set into a pan with an ice cream scoop. The biscuits at the Loveless Cafe, the restaurant featured in the Travel Channel episode, are particularly fluffy, and use more than one ingredient to give them their signature loftiness. They are a touch sweet but also a bit salty. And like most good Southern biscuits, they are made with self-rising soft wheat flour. But the key to a great biscuit, no matter the style, is this: It must be eaten hot.